

# MUSEUM news



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## Practising the art of living



**Simon Tait**

Simon Tait talks to **Dr Florian Schweizer**, chief executive, The National Association of Fine and Decorative Arts Societies

To most who've heard of NADFAS – the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies – but aren't members, it is a rather cosy club for middle-class ladies interested in art, who organise talks in their own homes over tea and scones. If ever that was true it is not now, and as NADFAS approaches its 50th anniversary its new young – 38, male and German - chief executive, Florian Schweizer, is changing it fundamentally. It was at the Glastonbury Festival this summer on a small outer stage, it's holding lectures in pubs and there is a growing number of evening lectures open to non-members. His implement for replanting the association deeper into our communities is a slim booklet,

an impact report on the last year – his first year - that takes its title from, of all people, Bertolt Brecht who wrote, “Every art contributes to the greatest art of all, the art of living”.

The Art of Living is packed with statistics that show NADFAS to be involved in heritage conservation, education at all levels, volunteering community activities, as well as responding to its membership's needs. It shows not only support for its outreach activities but appreciation of the community for what its members do there.

Last year more than 20,000 young people aged from six to 25 benefitted from the 427 NADFAS Young Arts projects in which it invested almost £200,000.

It supported 20 conservation students and apprentices through grants worth more than £100,000. Its volunteers have won awards for their work in museums and archives, and particularly in churches whose records have often been victim to funding shortage - since 1973 over 1,800 church records have been created by them, and 253 are currently in production.

The report was delivered to May's AGM and Schweizer's



**Reigate local Church Recorders checking research notes. Photo © Richard Eaton, courtesy NADFAS**

message to the 750 members was it was time for NADFAS to look outwards and create a more high profile role that can forge partnerships. “Charities can no longer afford to look inwards.” he says. “Delivering lectures, volunteering and grant-giving cannot be categorically seen as ‘good’ unless these activities bring real, positive changes for our members and the public”.

Dr Schweizer is a rare thing, a German expert on Victorian



literature, and a world authority on Charles Dickens, but his first love was the fine arts. His office walls at Nadfas House in Bloomsbury are covered with elegant, mostly abstract, paintings. They are testament to his fine art background, being the work of his late father, Hans Schweizer. “I like to have them near, they’re an ever-present friend,” he says.

Born in Westphalia, Germany, Florian’s mother was a writer, but it was Hans that tirelessly took his

small son about the museums and galleries of Dusseldorf, Stuttgart and Bonn.

*“He taught me how to look at art at a very early age, and so I’ve always been comfortable in the gallery atmosphere, it’s always an exciting place for me”.*

He studied English, literature and ancient history at Bonn University, had an internship at the Dickens Museum in Doughty Street and did a PhD in Victorian studies, before becoming the museum’s director. “It’s really quite simple,” he says of his mission there: “You take the art, you take the history, you take the literature and you prepare it for people”.

So in March 2014 it was a young man with an urge to push history forward that took the helm of a venerable organisation also

determined to look to the future, with a fixed gaze on the golden anniversary year of 2018.

NADFAS was founded by the late Patricia Fay, a housewife with a passion for art and antiques who started the first society at Chenies Manor in Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire, in 1965. Meeting usually in members’ homes for coffee and talk once a week, by 1968 there were 11 such societies, and Mrs Fay united them in NADFAS. There are now 90,000 members around the country, and its list of lecturers is a roll call of our key specialists in their fields.

There are now over 360 societies in the UK, all self-governing, and some have waiting lists. More and more newer DFASs, like the one recently opened in Birmingham,



**Photos: top: Dr Florian Schweizer, and left: Patricia Fay founder of NADFAS; opposite page: Harpenden Area DFAS Church Trail Project. All photos courtesy NADFAS.**



are evening societies reflecting the requirements of the 21st century membership. There are societies in Europe based on ex-pat communities, and New Zealand, and an association with a sister organisation in Australia.

The need now, he says, is to appeal to the 25-to-55 age group of both sexes, the professionals who have a fondness for art but don't have the time during the day to go to lectures or involve themselves in other activities.

"NADFAS is not a passive organisation, nor is it elitist which is another image" Schweizer says. "We welcome all people to join our societies, and respond to changing patterns of demographics and lifestyle. We've got to move with that."

The association is a charity, he says, which gives it a remit beyond its membership, and NADFAS has changed its articles of association so that it can now make partnerships with organisations

of national status like the Heritage Lottery Fund or the Art Fund, but also local ones concerned in important community projects where it can apply its expertise beyond the membership.

*"Our brief is to promote education of the arts to the public, and it has to be a wider public. Our members are one segment of that".*

NADFAS's volunteers have become legendary, notably in churches where its recorders have been working. "This time next year I hope to be able to launch a hallmark of volunteering and training," Schweizer says. "Our volunteers build relationships over decades and have become part of the life of museums, galleries and archives. We train hundreds if not thousands of people". In the autumn NADFAS is linking up

with National Heritage, in a new series of seminars on Volunteer Management.

The golden anniversary in 2018 will see another impact report which will reflect a transformation from the discourse among the membership and the communities in which it is already embedded. The possibility of a name change is even in the discourse.

"Our members love NADFAS, but it is just a name," Schweizer says. "If we can get more people in touch with the arts in the wider sense it's what we need to do, and we've got to be quite brave about it."

**For information about joining NADFAS, please see [www.nadfas.org.uk/get-involved/join-a-society](http://www.nadfas.org.uk/get-involved/join-a-society)**

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